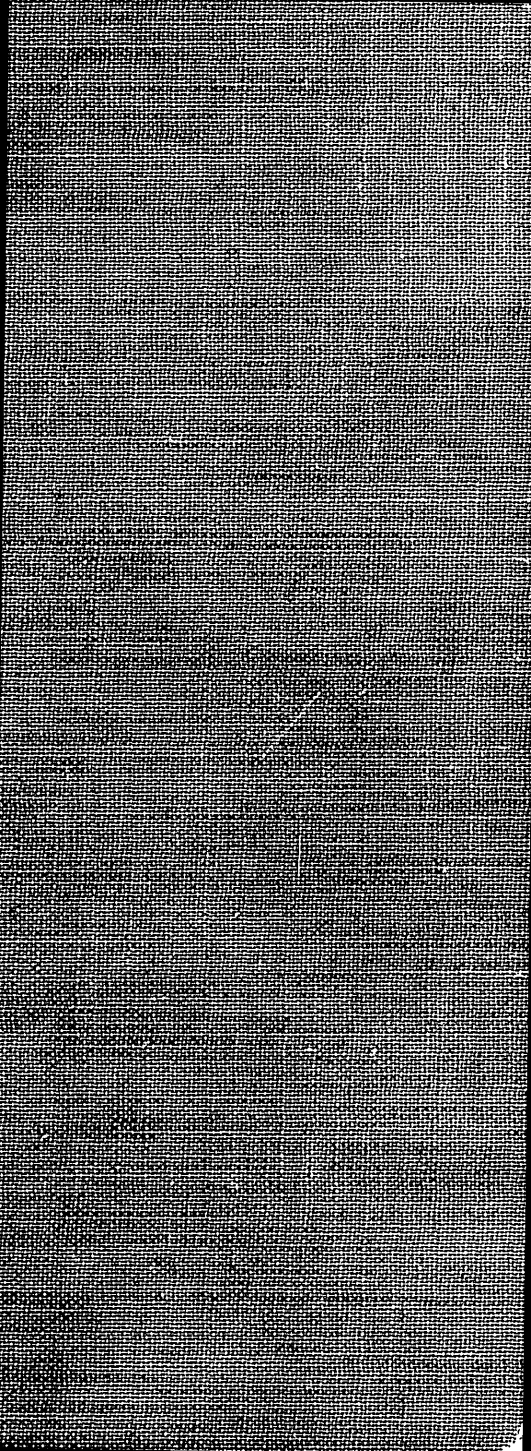


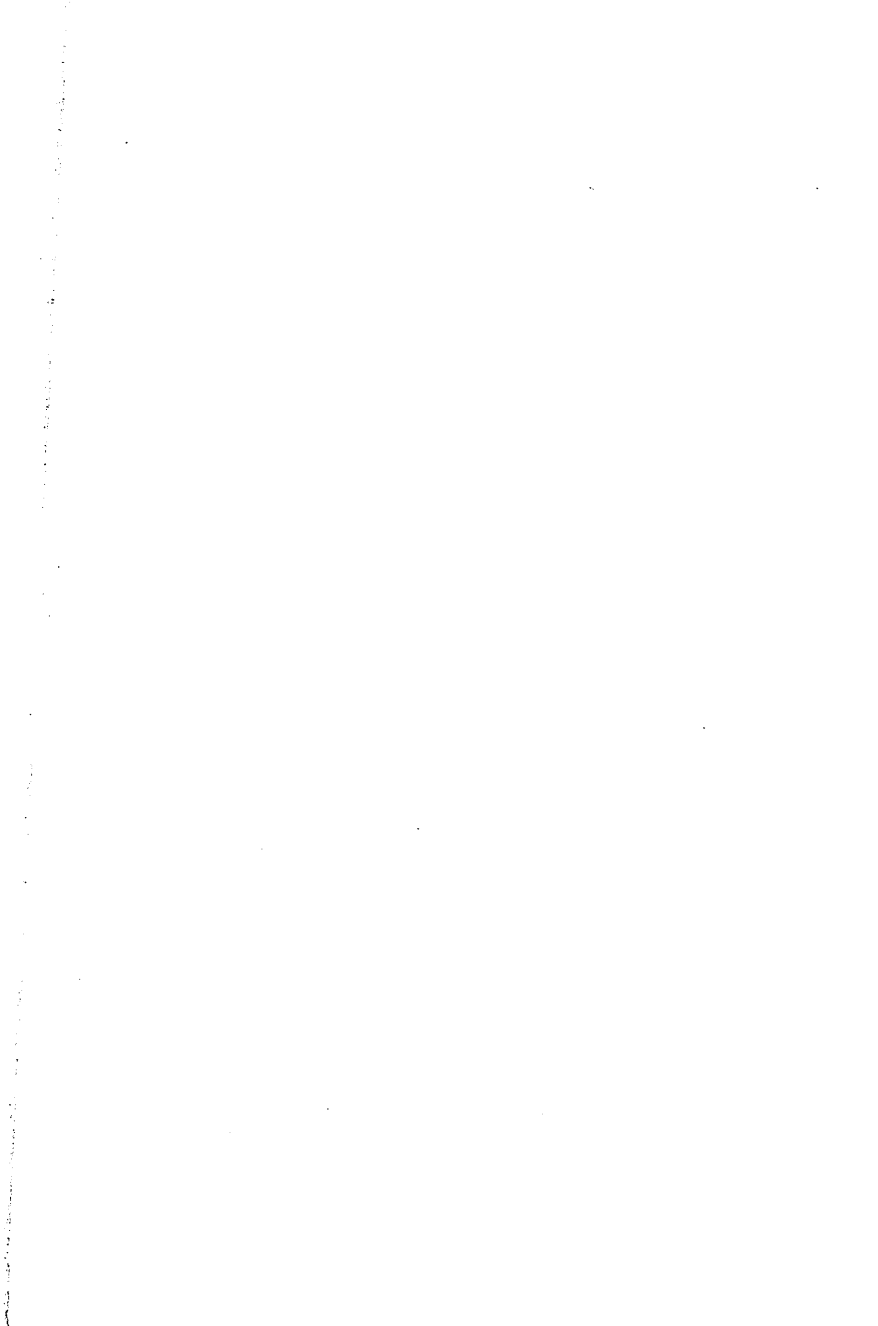
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THE FUNERAL MESSAGE



THE FUNERAL MESSAGE

ITS PREPARATION
AND SIGNIFICANCE

BY
EARL DANIELS
"



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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 11

By Dean Frederick D. Kershner of Butler
School of Religion, Indianapolis, Indiana.

CHAPTER I

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FUNERAL MESSAGE 15

Its Uniqueness. A Cosmopolitan Audience.
An Audience of Non-Church Attendants. A
Public Witness of the Gospel. An Opportunity
to Enter into Closer Fellowship with the Be-
reaved Family.

CHAPTER II

CHOOSING THE SUBJECT 25

Take the Measure of the Deceased. Re-create
the Past. Types of Funeral Messages.

CHAPTER III

THE BIOGRAPHICAL SERMON 35

A Man's Occupation. His Special Interests.
The Dominant Characteristic.

CHAPTER IV

THE OCCASIONAL SERMON 52

CAPITALIZING COINCIDENCES.

A Significant Age. A Personal Anniversary.
A Holiday. Weather Conditions. Family Circumstances.

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT SITUATIONS.

Suicide. Murder. Accident. Non-Churchmembers. A Fallen Woman.

CHAPTER V

THE DOCTRINAL SERMON 70

VARIETIES OF THE IMMORTAL HOPE.

A Seed Planted in the Ground. Death Is but a Sleep. The Dawning of a New Day. A River to Cross. A Ship Leaving Port. A Moving Day. A Family Reunion. A Victory.

REASONS FOR OUR FAITH.

The Greatness of God. The Goodness of God. The Worth of Man. The Testimony of Jesus Christ.

THE NATURE OF THE FUTURE LIFE.

Christian Fellowship. Christian Character. Christian Activity.

CHAPTER VI

THE FUNERAL SERVICE 94

Order of Service. Music. The Scripture. Prayer. The Obituary. At the Grave.

CHAPTER VII

TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR FUNERAL

MESSAGES 103

Thou Shalt Not Bear False Witness. Thou Shalt Remember That Sympathy Will Cover a Multitude of Homiletical Sins. Thou Shalt Not Be Heard for Thy Much Speaking. Thou Shalt Beware of Deathbed Stories. Thou Shalt Fit the Message to the Occasion. Thou Shalt Not Cry with a Loud Voice. Thou Shalt Not Proclaim Thy Doubts. Thou Shalt Not Denounce. Thou Shalt Not Harp upon One String. Thou Shalt Remember Always Thy Ambassadorship.



INTRODUCTION

THE LECTURES which constitute the basis of the present volume were delivered before the faculty and students of the Butler College of Religion, in November, 1935. They were so well received at that time that there were many requests for their publication. It will be gratifying to all who heard them to learn that they are to be preserved and made available through the medium of the printed page.

The author of the book was graduated from Butler University in the class of 1924. He entered Yale University for graduate study and received his advanced degree with the class of 1928. For the last eight years he has been pastor of the First Christian Church of Salem, Indiana. He has taken special work in the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary at Louisville, Kentucky, and has written for numerous newspapers and magazines, but it is my understanding that this is the first published volume to appear from his pen. Mr. Daniels edited *The Hoosier Preacher* for several years. He is now secretary of the Indiana Pastors' Association (Interdenominational), is secretary of the Board of

Directors of the Indiana Christian Missionary Association, and is also president of the Indiana Christian Ministers' Association. He is peculiarly qualified to write upon homiletical subjects.

It should be understood that this work is not a funeral manual and that, so far as we know, it does not duplicate any other work that has thus far been published. Its purpose is primarily to give a homiletical analysis of the funeral message and to outline a method by which every minister may adapt his discourse to the specific needs of the occasion. It would seem that a work like this should constitute an appropriate text for use in connection with the regular homiletic course in seminaries. Aside from its instructional value in the classroom, it should prove exceedingly suggestive and helpful to every young minister who is just entering upon the practical duties of his calling. Mr. Daniels deserves the thanks of all of us for the light which he has thrown upon a subject which has hitherto received only more or less casual and formal treatment.

FREDERICK D. KERSHNER.

*College of Religion,
Butler University, Indianapolis, Ind.
September 18, 1936.*

THE FUNERAL MESSAGE

CHAPTER I

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FUNERAL MESSAGE

A FEW YEARS AGO a fellow-minister told me this unusual experience. Coming directly from the seminary to his first pastorate in the month of August, his great fear was that he might have to conduct a funeral service. Upon his arrival he discovered that for the first two weeks of his new pastorate he was to be the only minister in town, the rest having left for their vacations.

As fate would have it, during the first ten days of his ministry he was called upon to conduct ten funerals—or an average of one each day! These services covered a wide variety of situations—the saint and the sinner, the tiny babe and the aged man, the rich man and the poor. All of this without any experience whatsoever! It is needless to say that he never forgot those harrowing days.

Few men have such an abrupt and strenuous entrance into the ministry of consolation. But regardless of whatever else he may or may not do, the minister must conduct funeral services, often upon short notice and under trying circumstances.

Before any man can do a task as it should be done, he must realize its importance. The young minister, just starting out, is apt to underestimate the significance of that hour when, as the representative of religion, he stands beside a still form and looks into anxious faces hungry for the consolation that cometh from above. But experience soon causes the thoughtful pastor to give an increasing emphasis to the ministry of consolation.

The funeral service is a significant occasion for the minister, for the bereaved family, and for the Church. It is worthy of a greater consideration than it receives. The following facts will help us to know the full measure of our responsibility.

I

One significance of the funeral message is its *uniqueness*. Death comes but once to every man. He may eat three times a day and, if he is religious, go to church once each week. He may even be so modern as to be married two or three times. But only once will he die. Only once will his friends gather about his dead body as a last tribute of love and affection. Only once will the minister be called upon to preach his funeral. In the words of a familiar motto we may say:

“I shall pass this way but once. Any word that I can say, or any kindness that I can show to any human being, let me do it now. Let me not defer or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again.”

These words, true of all life's experiences, are uniquely true of the funeral message. The fact that never again will this particular opportunity present itself, should instill a sense of privilege and responsibility.

II

A further significance of the funeral message lies in the *character of the audience* to which it is addressed. It is the most *cosmopolitan audience* which the average minister is likely to face. There will be people present from the north, the south, the east, and the west. Even in isolated rural communities it is not unusual to find that relatives from a half-dozen different states have left their varied duties at death's urgent call. Many a man who has been away from the home town for years, making a name for himself in the world, will be there, ready to give his undivided attention to anyone who really has a message.

A minister, on such occasions, is in a very real way casting his bread upon the waters. He may never see these visitors again. He may not even know their names. But among them will certainly be some who have grown careless in their attitude toward religion, and some whose burdens are more than they can bear, and many who need the strengthening assurance of faith. If the minister does his work faithfully, there may be many an unrecorded chapter of moral renewal and strengthening which may never come to his attention until that last great day when

the Lamb's Book of Life shall be opened before the throne of God.

The minister will make this discovery—that every person who attends the funeral service, whether they have met him personally or not, will feel from that time forth that he is acquainted with the officiating clergyman.

When I came to my first pastorate I was called upon to conduct funeral services in many rural sections throughout the country. I was amazed after a few months to find numbers of strangers in places where I was not acquainted who would say as I started to introduce myself, "O yes, I know you! You preached the funeral of my Uncle John last February." And with this unexpected background of acquaintance, they have made me feel that I was no stranger. Year after year these fellowships will increase until they reach into all sections of the community.

III

A third significance of the funeral service is *the number of persons present who seldom attend church at any other time*. Perhaps the minister has tried again and again to secure their presence at the services of the church—all without any visible success. But, because of their friendship or relationship to the deceased, they have come to this service, and there they sit for the first time, consciously or unconsciously judging the gospel and the Church by the spirit in which the service is conducted.

If the minister conducts the service in a perfunctory manner, thus betraying the fact that he is merely doing this as a part of his professional routine, he need never expect to see these people returning to hear the Word of God at the regular services. If these sheep who are outside the fold find no spiritual power, no vision of the eternal realities of life, no abiding consciousness of the living Christ, then they shall be content to remain outside.

But if, on the other hand, they find in their hour of bereavement a man of God, consecrated, sympathetic, and with a prepared message, who knows but what their restless souls may be turned to the worship of the living God?

IV

A fourth significance of the funeral message lies in the fact that it is *a public witness of the power of the gospel* in overcoming life's deepest tragedy. The glory of Christianity has been its triumph over death. Its founder hung on a cross, was buried in a tomb, and the third day rose triumphant over sin and the grave.

"Up from the grave He arose,
With a mighty triumph o'er His foes;
He arose a Victor from the dark domain,
And He lives forever with His saints to reign.
He arose! He arose!
Hallelujah! Christ arose!"

So sing the faithful today, and in the spirit of

that faith they can exclaim with Paul, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? . . . Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

But the tragedy is that Christians by their conduct in the presence of death do not always give evidence of their faith in the promises of Christ. Chrysostom, a preacher in the third century, calls attention to this lack of Christian fortitude in the facing of death:

"Believe me, I am ashamed and blush to see unbecoming groups of women pass along the mart, tearing their hair, cutting their arms and cheeks—all this under the eyes of the Greeks. For what will they not say? What will they not declare concerning us? Are these the men who reason about a resurrection? Indeed! How poorly their actions agree with their opinions! In words, they reason about a resurrection; but they act just like those who do not acknowledge a resurrection. If they fully believe in a resurrection, they would not act thus; if they had fully persuaded themselves that a deceased friend had departed to a better state, they would not thus mourn. These things, and more than these, the unbelievers will say when they hear those lamentations. Let us then be ashamed, and be more moderate, and not occasion so much harm to ourselves and to those who are looking on us."¹

¹ Sermon "On Excessive Grief at the Death of Friends," from Vol. I, page 31, *World's Greatest Sermons*, published by Funk & Wagnalls Co.

The funeral service is a time for Christians to witness the faith they have in immortality, in Jesus Christ as a Saviour, and in God as a loving Father. It is a brutal testing of that faith which they have in sunnier days proclaimed with their lips. Face to face with death, they are battling in the front-line trenches. No pious platitudes, no misty sentimentalism will successfully meet the stark reality of this hour. Anxious eyes are turned to the minister, if perchance he will be able to bring the word of healing which shall bind up the wounds of the brokenhearted, and fashion anew their shattered faith.

There is no other way for a minister to do this than by facing these problems for himself. Like Jacob of old, he must challenge his own doubts and fears, wrestling with them in prayer until the break of day. It is not enough to gather beautiful poems and lofty sentiments. Behind the utterance of the minister must be a burning sincerity and rugged faith born out of a vital experience of God.

The hour of the funeral message is an hour of testing of the gospel's power. The minister is there to give a saner and truer view of death to those who are present. A most eloquent proof of the power of Christianity would be to transform the outlook of those who mourn. I recently conducted a service for a beloved pastor. The memory of that widow's fortitude in facing her loss is a benediction. She told me later that before he died he had asked her to face

it so. Such triumph of faith over human sorrow is the glory of our religion.

V

A fifth significance of the funeral message is *the opportunity to enter, once and for all time, into the sacred, inner fellowship of the bereaved family.* When death comes, it levels most of the barriers which separate us in ordinary life. The floodgates of the soul are unlocked, and in the hour of grief our little tributaries unite to form one great current of understanding.

He who is invited to minister in a home where death has come should sense the full significance of that invitation. It is nothing less than an opportunity to become a part of the inner circle of that home, a sharer of their deepest experiences. For the rest of their earthly lives they will be more open to his suggestions, more accessible to the message of the gospel, if he proves worthy of the trust which has been placed in him.

Let the minister therefore identify himself sympathetically with the bereaved family. Let him remember that for them the whole world has been blotted out. They can hardly realize why anyone goes about their accustomed tasks. In their abandonment to grief, their requests may often seem strange, even unreasonable, but if the minister meets their requests in a spirit of sympathy and understanding, he shall be repaid a thousandfold by their appreciation and confidence in his ambassadorship.

For these reasons, then, the funeral message is significant: (1) It is unique, given only once for each individual. (2) It is given before a cosmopolitan audience. (3) The audience includes many who seldom attend a religious service. (4) It is a public witness of the power of the gospel in overcoming life's greatest tragedy. (5) It is an opportunity to enter into closer fellowship with the bereaved family.

If this, then, is the significance of the funeral message we may well ask, "And with what preparation do we come to this significant hour?" The actual fact is that we face this most critical hour with less preparation than almost anything else we do. That great sermon given before the National Convention is worked over painstakingly for weeks in advance. The regular Sunday sermon is the flowering of precious seed planted and tended through the days. These messages are planned for by every faithful minister with apostolic consecration. But what of the funeral message?

A call over the telephone. A brief visit to the grief-stricken home. A mere day, or even hours, crowded with parish duties before he must stand in the presence of death and represent his Lord.

It is impossible to predict when these calls will come. Death is no respecter of persons or pastoral schedules. It often seems that the death angel deliberately picks the most difficult time for the funeral service. The minister may be at home for many days without a single call, but let him leave town overnight for a Convention or Board meeting, and

the telephone and telegraph will hasten to call him home.

The circumstances which await him as he enters the bereaved home are of infinite variety and difficulty. The deceased may have been one of God's elect or a very child of Satan. The home may be a lordly mansion or a humble cottage. The deceased may have gone forth in the full tide of the years or have been snatched untimely in some sudden or disgraceful death. The minister may speak to hearts that are aching with loneliness and eyes that are filled with tears, or, what is even more difficult, he may speak to those who do not care. Truly the message for such an hour demands all that we have of wisdom, both human and Divine.

I have found in my talks with clergymen that there is hardly any other thing in all their ministration which more bewilders them than the funeral message. Their words seem only like so many random shots in the dark. Of what use are the great stacks of homiletical funeral lumber furnished by the average funeral manual if the builder has no plan? Shall he merely fill in the time by quoting miscellaneous passages from scripture, and string together verses of poetry with a few orthodox, pious platitudes, or is there a more excellent way?

I believe that there is; and having waited in vain for some more able representative to fill up the void which I have found in my own pastoral ministry, I have worked out the method described in the following chapters.

CHAPTER II

CHOOSING THE SUBJECT

MANY GOOD MESSAGES go astray because they do not fit the occasion. This is especially true of the funeral sermon. Some preachers have a few stereotyped messages of consolation or exhortation which they warm over time and time again, until the habitual funeral-goer can prophesy with a great deal of accuracy what the preacher is going to say on any given occasion.

The task which we now set before us is to see whether there is not some dependable method whereby a minister will be able to choose a theme for his funeral message which will fit the particular needs of each occasion. Let us begin at that moment when he first learns of the funeral service which he is to conduct. He is glancing anxiously through the Bible, a funeral manual, and his sermon barrel for help in choosing a subject. We will suggest three steps through which he may prepare himself to make a timely choice.

First, let him *take the measure of the deceased*. The minister would do well to learn a lesson from the tailor. The tailor does not have the same size suit for every man. If he did, it would not be long before

he would be out of business—for nobody would come to him. He knows that Mr. Smith, who is tall and thin, cannot wear the same suit as Mr. Brown, who is short and fat. And so, when each of these gentlemen comes to him he carefully takes his measure—the length of his arms and legs, the girth of his waist, the breadth of his shoulders, and from these measurements he makes the suit. The successful tailor is the one who can make the suit fit the individual man, no matter what his peculiarities may be. Now, the successful preacher, no less than the tailor, must take the measure of the man, he must endeavor in his own mind to make a true estimate of the deceased.

He will go immediately to the nearest relatives and express his sympathy for them in their hour of bereavement. He will generally be able by a few tactful words to cause the members of the bereaved family to unburden their souls and reveal many tender memories of the departed one. He will linger at the home for a while to talk with the friends and neighbors who have also come to express their sympathy. They will generally call to mind their own experiences in relation to the deceased.

By this time the minister will have seen to it that the family has appointed some one to write the obituary, if an obituary is to be used. This should be some one who knows intimately the life of the deceased. The minister may explain to this person that he would like to have in mind the essential facts of the life as he prepares his message. This he can

grasp in a few minutes if he is a good listener. Let him note the place and date of birth, his family connections, the character of his moral and religious life, his occupation, his special interests, and the organizations with which he was identified.

In all of this testimony the minister will have to use his own common sense with regard to the comparative value of the testimony which he receives. He will note carefully the home situation and make allowance for the unconscious exaggeration of friends. Then, if there should be any question in his mind, he would do well to go quietly to one of his trusted church leaders for confidential information.

I am well aware that the above precautions will seem unnecessary to many young and inexperienced ministers who read these pages. But I am confident that those of experience will readily understand.

There is one counsel which I would bring with particular urgency: **BE SURE OF YOUR FACTS!** Make no statement in your sermon which you would not be able to substantiate, if necessary, before a court of law. Not that you are to make any accusations or condemnations. It is extremely doubtful if such words are ever justifiable at a funeral service, no matter how evil the individual has been. But every minister stands before the bar of public opinion in his community. He will be judged by the statements which he makes; and if these statements are repeatedly proved to be exaggerated and false, people will lose confidence in what he says.

Some flowery funeral orations, like the following story, seem too good to be true:

Mose Jackson was dead, and was having a large funeral. The minister was telling all the good things he could think of about the deceased. Mose had been a loving husband, a wonderfully kind father, a genial neighbor, a very solicitous provider for his family, and a very constant and benevolent church member.

About that time Mandy, the widow, began to get uneasy. Leaning down to her young son she said, "Rastus, you go look in that coffin an' see if dat's yo' paw."

That was not the only funeral sermon which failed to agree with the facts.

It will be a sobering thought for the minister to remember as he prepares his message that he will be speaking to people who know intimately the life of the deceased. They will be quick to detect any word which does not square with the facts of experience.

Several years ago a saintly minister of the old school was preaching the funeral of a woman whose past he had not taken the trouble to investigate. For years she had been known throughout the community as a notoriously immoral woman. But, utterly oblivious of all this, he proceeded to usher her into the pearly gates, and exalt her as the highest type of womanhood. As the climax of his sermon, he declared, in the presence of family and friends, that he could wish for the two daughters who survived no

greater blessing than that they should follow in their mother's footsteps!

Unless the minister knows beyond the shadow of a doubt the real character of the deceased, he had better maintain a discreet silence.

Second, let the minister *endeavor to re-create the past* of the one who is dead. It is noticeable that when death comes to a home, the family usually prefers to call a minister who has been acquainted with their home over a long period of years. The reason for this is obvious. They feel that because of his long association with the family he can enter more sympathetically into the funeral service. He may have baptized the deceased or members of his family. He may have pronounced the words which made them man and wife. He may have been with them in the intimate fellowship of the family life. Days of happiness and nights of sorrow have forged a link by which hearts of minister and family are bound together. As this minister stands beside their loved one at the service, he seems to fit naturally into the picture. Because of the intimate associations of the years, it is easy for such a minister to re-create the past and bring a message of consolation and sympathy.

But even if the deceased is comparatively unknown to the minister, it will be possible, by the use of a consecrated imagination, to re-create the world of which he was a part. And by so doing, he will be able to enter intelligently and sympathetically into the ministry of consolation. Bereaved hearts will say,

"This man, stranger though he be, understands our life, and bears our sorrow upon his heart."

Even if the minister were not to make a single personal reference during the service, this practice of re-creating the past would be tremendously worthwhile. For it is not only the words we say, but the spirit in which we say them that counts. And we cannot speak with full assurance until we have enacted upon the stage of our own imagination the scenes through which the one about whom we are to speak has passed.

It is said that Richard Wagner, the famous composer, when writing his immortal operas would shut himself up for days in his room. As he wrote the parts for the various characters, he would dress himself in the appropriate costume for that part, putting himself as nearly as possible into the situation. In this way he was able to give a vividness and reality to his music which might not otherwise have been possible.

This practice of putting one's self into the other fellow's shoes is good for any one. It is invaluable for the speaker. It is not enough to have stood apart as a critic taking the measure of a man. This step must needs be followed by another. He must come closer, until his own identity and experience are merged into the life of the departed. The dead must be brought to life. The events of life's yesterdays must be recalled.

Go back to the beginning of that life. Picture the babe, the cradle in which he slept, the mother whose

arms held him tenderly to her breast; the father who stood proudly by; the community which surrounded that home; the contemporary events in the life of the nation and the world.

What was his occupation? Was he carpenter or lawyer, farmer or soldier? Picture him as he was in the days of his strength, as he did the day's task. Feel the joy and thrill of his work. Experience also its difficulties, its hardships, its petty annoyances, its wearisome burdens.

What were his hobbies? How did he amuse himself during his spare moments? Did he play horseshoes or checkers? Did he like to travel, or would he prefer to read a book in some quiet corner by the fire-side? Did he play baseball? Go hunting?

What were the sorrows of his life? What deep disappointments had he suffered? What loved ones had gone on to make the thought of heaven more attractive by their presence there?

What were his achievements? What are the things that remain as a permanent contribution to the life of his community? What organizations did he support? What individuals felt the quickening influence of his encouragement and assistance?

These are a few of the questions which flash through the mind. The answering of these questions will help to clear away the mists and reveal the path which the minister is to take in his message.

TYPES OF FUNERAL MESSAGES

When a man plays golf, he takes with him a variety of clubs, each with its particular use. After he has sighted the desired goal, and noticed the conditions under which he must make the stroke, he chooses from his pack the proper club. If he is in a clear space and desires to make a long shot, he will take a driving club. If he is in high grass, or desires to raise the ball from off the ground to surmount some obstacle as a fence or a brook, he will take a mashie. If he is on the green and has but a short distance to go, he will use the putter. Thus by a wise use of the proper club he is able to make the desired goal.

Now, the preacher, after having taken the measure of a life, and having endeavored to re-create the past, must decide what type of sermon will best accomplish his purpose. Here is where we make an interesting discovery. While there are many helps in preaching funeral sermons, there is not (to my knowledge) any book which makes a classification of the funeral sermon from a homiletical point of view.

A simple arrangement would be the Biographical, the Occasional, and the Doctrinal.

The *Biographical Sermon* (see Chapter III) arises out of the life experiences of the deceased. It is the presentation of the importance of that life to the community. It may have been because of the fine way he exemplified the highest in his chosen occupation as teacher, doctor, soldier, business man. It may have been through some notable contribution to the

community life in a church, lodge, or club. Or again it may have been some outstanding characteristic of his life such as generosity or honesty. Whatever has been the dominant note of a worthy life is a fruitful source for a funeral message.

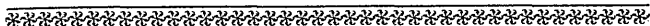
The *Occasional Sermon* (see Chapter IV) deals with unusual situations. The deceased may have died under unusual circumstances such as murder, suicide, or accident. There may have been some coincidence of time or place which could be used by the alert minister to drive home an unforgettable message. The occasional sermon is, just as its name implies, a sermon for the special situation which has a significance all its own. It requires resourcefulness and a double portion of common sense to give this type of sermon, but it is often very effective.

The *Doctrinal Sermon* (see Chapter V) centers its attention, not upon the individual (as in the Biographical Sermon), nor upon the special circumstances (as in the Occasional Sermon), but upon the experience of Death and the problems which it raises in our minds. The Doctrinal Sermon is an opportunity to assert the reasons for the hope of immortality, and to answer such questions as these: What difference does it make whether we believe in a future life? What will heaven be like? Will we know our loved ones there? How are the dead raised? These and similar questions may be profitably discussed if handled in a proper manner.

The Doctrinal Sermon is also an opportunity to consider the sources of our comfort, to show the

greatness and the love of God, and his care for those who mourn.

These, then, are the three great divisions into which we group our funeral messages. In the chapters which follow, we shall deal in detail with these types of sermons.



CHAPTER III

THE BIOGRAPHICAL SERMON

NEAR THE EILDON HILLS OF SCOTLAND there is a beautiful spot known as Sir Walter's View. It is perhaps the loveliest view on the Border. Here, Walter Scott used to drive in his carriage and sit silently for half an hour gazing over the land. It is said that at his funeral the long line of carriages was held up at this spot because Scott's carriage horses, drawing the hearse, stopped at the view he loved so well and stood patiently there for half an hour as they had done so often before.

The most natural impulse of friends at a funeral service is to linger in memory over the scenes which were cherished by the departed one. The ending of their earthly pilgrimage causes us to pause and look back over the way which they have come. Incidents long forgotten come back with unaccustomed power. If only the minister could see the scenes which crowd the memory of the audience at the time he speaks to them, how amazed he would be! Behind those quiet faces are the most lively thoughts.

Every life has its unique message for the world. The funeral sermon offers an opportunity for the presentation of that message. Where a man has

lived a life of usefulness, making a worthy contribution to the welfare of his community, the Biographical Sermon is often the logical choice for the minister's message.

There is a distinguishing characteristic to every life, a common center around which all the varied activities unite. Sometimes it is to be found in a man's occupation or profession. Again, it may be in his outside interests or hobbies. Or perhaps it is some distinguishing trait of character. These are all fruitful sources for the Biographical Sermon.

A. A MAN'S OCCUPATION

We should remember that the largest part of the average man's waking hours are spent in the performance of that task by which he earns his daily bread. Any message would be incomplete which left out of consideration this important part of his life. No man can be happy in the fullest sense of the word if he finds no satisfaction, no incentive in his chosen occupation.

In many cases the Biographical Sermon may so dignify a certain trade or profession as to give all those present a higher conception of that particular calling. How much that higher conception is needed is suggested in the following story:

Three stonemasons were working side by side. The visitor asked each of these three men the same question, "What are you doing?" The first man replied, "I am laying stone." The second said, "I am making \$5 a day." But the third man answered with a touch

of pride, "I am helping to build a great cathedral." Three men, each doing the same kind of work, yet how differently they viewed their task.

There will usually be present at the service a number of men who are spending their lives in that same occupation, and still others among the young who will take up that work. What a worthy aim it is to send all these folk back to their daily tasks, inspired to do their work better, and with a greater appreciation of its value to the community.

Take, for example, the death of a *physician* after long years of honorable service in a community. Perhaps he has managed, in spite of the constant demands of a large practice, to give generously of his time and means to the Church, also teaching a class of young men in the Bible School. In his practice he has upheld the highest standards of his profession, and in all his intimate fellowship with his patients he has conducted himself as a Christian gentleman. What an opportunity to speak of "The Christian Physician," calling to mind the story of Luke, the beloved physician who accompanied Paul on his missionary journeys and whose constant care for the frail body of the thirteenth apostle made possible the herculean labors by which the seeds of the gospel were planted in the soil of many nations. Think of how many of the world's leaders today, from the president down to the humblest citizen, are dependent upon the consecrated knowledge of Christian physicians for the restoring of their bodies to the strength needed for their tasks. The presence in the audience of

hundreds of those whose health has been restored by the labors of this man will bring this truth home with unforgettable power.

Or perhaps the death of this physician has been hastened by devotion to his task, by his bravery in an epidemic, by his refusal to turn a deaf ear to the incessant calls which came by day or night. In such a case how fitting are those words first applied to Jesus as he hung in agony upon the cross, "He saved others; himself he cannot save." Of course, he could not save himself and others at the same time, and he chose to save others. Some must die, that others may live.

Closely akin to the work of the physician is that of the *nurse*. An increasing number of fine young women are choosing this as their means of service. For the death of a nurse there is a beautiful reference to Deborah, the faithful nurse of Rebecca. "But Deborah Rebecca's nurse died, and she was buried beneath Bethel under an oak." Here is an opportunity to testify as to the affection which we have for those who tenderly care for our loved ones in their illness.

In the case of those who have given their lives to some form of artistic endeavor, such as *writing*, *painting*, or *music*, there is a wealth of background.

Take the instance of a woman who had been prominent as a newspaper and magazine writer. With such a subject as "The Continued Story" a timely expression of the immortal hope is possible. Life is a story. The materialists say that it is a short story,

and that after a few brief experiences in this present life the story ends. The Christian believes that life is a continued story. This world is but the first chapter of a serial story which is to be continued in the next issue.

The immortal hope is expressed in an unusual way in the epitaph written by Benjamin Franklin for his own tombstone: "The body of Benjamin Franklin, printer, like the cover of an old book, its contents torn and stripped of its lettering and gilding, lies herein food for worms; but the work shall not be lost, for it will, as he believed, appear once more in a new and more elegant edition, revised and corrected by the Author."

How fitting at the close of a service for an author to say, "My friends, we have not come to the end of the story. We have but paused for a moment at the end of the chapter. As we look with the eye of faith we see these words written at the bottom of the page: TO BE CONTINUED."

The passing of a *musician* is a time to acknowledge "The Power of Music" in our life today. Music is the universal language understood by all races and all nations. Its soothing tones steal away our sadness ere we are aware, and, like Saul of old, our restless minds are soothed into peace. In time of crisis our laggard spirits are roused to heroism by stirring strains of martial music. How much our lives are enriched by its harmony. He who writes a song or plays beautiful music makes a contribution to the

community life just as essential as he who tills the soil.

The varieties of musical expression are capable of endless application. The organist who for so many years has played for the church services may now in heaven's harmony be finding "The Lost Chord."

"It may be that Death's bright angel
Will speak in that chord again,
It may be that only in Heaven
I shall hear that grand Amen."

The director of the church choir now becomes a member of "The Choir Invisible," ten thousand times ten thousand in number, standing around the throne of God, singing the song of Moses and the Lamb.

The cornetist becomes one of "The Trumpets of God" calling all men to the Divine duty.

The harpist has graduated from earth's conservatory and now becomes one of the multitude of those who in heaven are "harping with their harps."

Here again is some gospel singer, who in life has won many to Christ through the consecration of her gifts. What an opportunity to tell some of the transformations made in lives through the singing of the hymns of faith.

One of the most unusual opportunities which the writer has ever had in applying the significance of an occupation was in the funeral service for a veteran employee of the New Haven Clock Company. This man had worked for over thirty years as a

clock-maker. A large delegation from the factory was present, all of whom, like the deceased, were helping each day to make clocks. These facts made the presence of a beautiful clock on the mantel in the funeral parlor seem all the more significant. As it ticked away in the stillness of that hour, marking the minutes, the words of the ninetieth Psalm gave "The Message of the Clock," saying, "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom." The clock was a reminder of the passage of time, and our obligation to use it aright. From an old poem by Longfellow came these verses :

"Somewhat back from the village street
Stands the old-fashioned country-seat.
Across its antique portico
Tall poplar trees their shadows throw ;
And from its station in the hall
An antique timepiece says to all :
 'Forever—never !
 Never—forever !'

Through days of sorrow and of mirth,
Through days of death and days of birth,
Through every swift vicissitude
Of changeful time, unchanged it has stood,
And as if, like God, it all things saw,
It calmly repeats those words of awe :
 'Forever—never !
 Never—forever !'

Never here, forever there,
Where all parting, pain, and care,

And death, and time shall disappear—
Forever there, but never here!
The horologe of Eternity
Sayeth this incessantly:
‘Forever—never!
Never—forever!’ ” ¹

Among the various trades how many illustrations can be found to express the meaning of a life. Who can ponder over the fact that the Son of God, the Saviour of the World, was a carpenter and ever be quite the same again?

Take the instance of a *contractor*, who had built a number of useful and beautiful bridges in the community. How appropriate to pay tribute to his life as “The Bridge-BUILDER.” The purpose of the bridge is to make possible communication between one section of the country and another. This man in his lifetime had spanned many a chasm with a bridge, thus uniting those who were separated. Christ was a Bridge-builder. By his Atonement he built a bridge over the chasm of sin which separated mankind from God. We are all called to be bridge-builders by putting our influence into those enterprises which will bring man in to a closer relation with his neighbor and his God.

A familiar poem by the late Will Allen Dromgoole will emphasize this theme:

¹ Used by permission of, and by arrangement with, Houghton Mifflin Company.

“An old man, going a lone highway,
Came at the evening, cold and gray,
To a chasm, vast and deep and wide,
Through which was flowing a sullen tide;
The old man crossed in the twilight dim.
The sullen stream had no fear for him;
But he turned when safe on the other side
And built a bridge to span the tide.

‘Old man,’ said a fellow pilgrim near,
‘You are wasting your strength with building here;
‘Your journey will end with the ending day,
You never again will pass this way;
You have crossed the chasm deep and wide;
Why build you this bridge at eventide?’

The builder lifted his old gray head—
‘Good friend, in the path I have come,’ he said,
‘There followeth after me today
A youth whose feet must pass this way;
This chasm that has been as naught to me,
To that fair-haired youth may a pitfall be;
He, too, must cross in the twilight dim—
Good friend, I am building this bridge for him.’ ”

There are many appropriate themes in the Bible for the funeral of a *farmer*. The pages of the Gospels are crammed with references to the everyday facts of farm life as illustrations of spiritual truth. “He that putteth his hand to the plow and looketh back is not fit for the kingdom of God,” “Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap,” “I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh

my help," "The kingdom of heaven is like unto a grain of mustard seed."

For a farmer who has lived to a ripe old age there is a very appropriate verse in Job 5: 25, "Thou shalt come to thy grave in a full age, like as a shock of corn cometh in his season." A message on "Life's Harvest Time" could take its illustration right out of that farm life with which the deceased was so familiar. Sometimes life is cut short like corn which has been blighted by disease or frost. But when it grows through the years to the mellow richness of age, it is ready for the harvest. This life has fulfilled its purpose; the time of harvest has come, and he has answered, leaving the rich fruitage of a life well spent.

Most pastors will find little difficulty in finding suitable texts for those who have been *soldiers*. The Bible contains many stirring military phrases, such as "Put on the whole armor of God," "Fight the good fight of faith," etc., while the literature of the ages is saturated with the stories of military heroism. There is a fine saying of Jesus which may be applied to "The Soldier's Sacrifice," as reported in John: "Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."

A beautiful verse from Sir Walter Scott often makes a fitting conclusion:

"Soldier, rest! thy warfare o'er!
Sleep the sleep that knows not breaking;

Dream of battlefields no more,
Days of danger, nights of waking."

For the *sailor* there is a beautiful verse in the twentieth chapter of Acts where Paul bids farewell to the elders of the Church at Ephesus who had come down to spend a few moments with him at Miletus, before Paul should set sail for Jerusalem. Knowing that they would see him no more, "they accompanied him to the ship." That tender farewell is one of the most beautiful passages in the New Testament. These words suggest "The Sailor's Farewell." The passing of the sailor is like when he goes down to his ship to set sail for some distant port. He who has ever seen a great ocean liner "put out to sea" can never forget the sight—the last-minute preparations, the parting messages, the waving of handkerchiefs with their mute farewells to friends on deck and wharf. It is so that we bid farewell to our sailor lads who leave for the Great Beyond. The old words of Tennyson are full of new meaning:

"Sunset and evening star,
And one clear call for me!
And may there be no moaning of the bar,
When I put out to sea.

For such a tide as moving seems asleep,
Too full for sound and foam,
When that which drew from out the boundless deep
Turns again home.

Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark!
And may there be no sadness of farewell,
When I embark.

For though from out our bourne of time and place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face,
When I have crossed the bar."

B. HIS SPECIAL INTERESTS

Another fruitful source of material for the Biographical Sermon is a man's special interests or hobbies. It can be truthfully said that we do not really know a man unless we know his hobbies. A man's occupation is often a matter of necessity; his hobby is a matter of choice. He may be employed at a certain factory, not because that is the kind of work he likes to do best, but because that is the only thing he can get to do. An only son may inherit a lumber business from his father, when his real inclinations lie in newspaper work.

In life, showing an interest and enthusiasm for a man's hobby is a sure way to his heart. In death, a true and sympathetic interpretation of that life should include a knowledge of those special interests which were dear to him.

What an infinite variety of hobbies there are in the world! A friend of mine confided the other day that his hobby was neckties! He said that every time he passed a necktie counter in a store he was seized with an irresistible impulse to buy one more. I am

not sure that I could point out any funeral homiletics in such a hobby, but there are many that are suggestive. For instance, there is a man in our community who collects old canes. I had visited him often before I knew of their existence. He opened a closet door and proudly showed his collection. There they were—long and short, straight and crooked, old and new. One belonged to grandfather and another, which originally came from France, serves a double purpose, for within it is concealed a dagger which can be quickly pulled out and used for defense.

Suppose that you are called into this home in time of death. You think of those canes. And there comes to you a new illustration of that verse in the Shepherd Psalm, "Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." How like the shepherd's rod and staff is this cane—a staff to lean upon in time of weakness, and a rod to defend in time of danger.

In one of our thriving Midwest cities lives the president of a great business concern whose activities encircle the globe. He has made, even through the depression years, a great success of his business, and by his generous philanthropy, his considerate treatment of his employees, and his high civic consecration he has become one of his state's most honored citizens. But it is probably by his hobby of collecting original manuscripts of Stephen Foster that his name will be most remembered in the years to come. Upon his country estate there is a beautiful chapel, housing the manuscripts of the beloved composer. Foster

Hall has become a mecca for lovers of these songs of his heart. This man is courteous and attentive as you take care of your business with him, but when you mention his beloved Stephen Foster there is an immediate quickening of his spirit and a light in his eye. The soul of this man is in his hobby—the songs of Foster.

Take the case of a man who in his youth was a star on his college track team. He traveled all over the country, and by his brilliant records brought glory to his alma mater, even going to the Olympics. Regardless of what may have been the particular occupation by which he earned his bread, what could be more appropriate than the memory of the races he had run? “Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, . . . let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith.”

Or here, perhaps, is a man who found his recreation in reading good books. Sitting by the fireside at the close of a busy day, his greatest joy was with some well-worn volume. How appropriate are these words from Revelation (20: 12), “And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened.” Here was not one who deluded himself into thinking that unopened books on his shelves would make him wise. He made their treasure his own. How wonderful to picture him in heaven’s fellowship, with the familiar opened book.

These are but a few random suggestions from an

innumerable variety. Only occasionally will these personal hobbies have any great significance, but it is worth the effort to remember these mirrors of the soul.

Sometimes a person's special interest centers in a certain institution. Here is some motherly woman, denied children of her own, who has interested herself in an orphans' home, and by her patient, self-forgetful work through the years, has changed the destiny of many an underprivileged child.

Here is a man who has interested himself in some fraternal order, going through all the chairs, and receiving high distinction not only locally but nationally.

There are many churches over the country which were built as memorials by men of wealth who desired to express in permanent form their interest in the work of the Kingdom.

These are the by-products of busy lives. How fine it is that so many of the world's successful men have constructive hobbies, by which they find great enjoyment and bring happiness to others.

C. THE DOMINANT CHARACTERISTIC

Almost every person has some dominant characteristic which sets him apart from his fellow men. It will often be possible to resolve this characteristic into a theme which can be aptly illustrated in Scripture.

1. *Honesty.* Some time ago while a minister was preparing for a funeral service, a number of persons

who had done business with the deceased spoke regarding his wonderful honesty. Like the Rock of Gibraltar this fact towered in the memory of his friends. The minister therefore chose this text, "That we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty." Speaking on "The Influence of an Honest Life," it was shown that real honesty is rare. Diogenes, the Greek philosopher, was found one day going through the streets of Athens in broad daylight with a lantern in his hand, peering into every corner as if he were looking for something. When asked what he was doing, he replied: "I am looking for an honest man." After our experiences in the devious ways of modern business, we are convinced that Diogenes was right. Real honesty is rare, and until we have more of it we cannot have lasting confidence.

2. *Faithfulness.* Often we find some rare soul who has the gift of faithfulness. Occasionally it will be a five-talent or a two-talent man who has rendered conspicuous service with brilliant acclaim. But generally it will be some one-talent person, who has not followed the bad example of the man in the Scripture story by despising that talent and burying it in the ground. Instead, he has found that small things for which he has ability, and by unwearying fidelity has exalted the insignificant task. After all, only a few great leaders are needed, but of faithful followers ten thousand times ten thousand. For every victorious general there must be a host of unknown soldiers who are faithful unto death.

All about us are the faithful. They sound not the trumpet before them. So quietly do they do their work that we are hardly conscious of their presence. But if they should fail, we would find to our humility how much we depend upon them. What if the milkman should lie in bed, the mailman forget to come, the telephone operator go asleep at the switchboard?

Faithfulness is one of the world's most needed virtues. "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee the crown of life."

3. *Generosity.* While the majority of people in a community live in a sort of enlightened selfishness, there are here and there those rare souls who, forgetful of self, think only of others. They are generous of their time and money, and by that generosity they put to shame the calculating gifts of smaller souls.

"Lord, help me live from day to day
In such a self-forgetful way
That even when I kneel to pray
My prayer will be for—*Others.*

And when my work on earth is done
And my new work in heaven is begun
May I forget the crown I've won
While thinking still of—*Others.*"¹

¹ Charles D. Meigs. Used by permission of copyright owners, Meigs Publishing Company, Indianapolis, Ind.

CHAPTER IV

THE OCCASIONAL SERMON

GOOD PREACHING IS BOTH TIMELESS AND TIMELY. While proclaiming eternal and ageless truths, it fits the message to the occasion. The unusual circumstances surrounding the funeral service will often furnish the alert, resourceful minister with many opportunities to impress the truth upon those who attend. One of these ways is by capitalizing coincidences.

A. CAPITALIZING COINCIDENCES

A coincidence is something which “happens together.” Life is filled with such experiences, and death is not without its reminders. If the minister has quietly but carefully studied the life of the deceased in the manner suggested in Chapter II, he will be in a position to look for those unusual circumstances which often surround a funeral. We mention here a few of these coincidences.

1. *A Significant Age.* How old is a man at the time of his death? His age may suggest nothing unusual—and again it may. In the course of my ministry I have again and again thought of something

significant in connection with the particular age of the deceased.

Here, for instance, is the tragedy of a high-minded, consecrated young man of thirty-three years having his life cut short just at the threshold of opportunity. Whatever the subject of the funeral message, one could not help but note in passing that this was the very age of our Lord Jesus Christ when he hung upon the Cross—his lifework apparently unfulfilled. Yet time has shown that in those thirty-three years of concentrated consecration, the Man of Galilee crowded more real achievement than old Methuselah with all his nine hundred and sixty-nine years. "The Measure of a Life" is not the number of years we happen to exist upon the earth, but rather the use we make of the years we have. Measured in these terms, a short life may really be the longest.

"We live in deeds, not years."

The normal span of life is seventy years—threescore and ten. When a man has attained to this age, he is regarded as having attained his full measure of years. When more years are given to him than the average, there is cause for gratitude. I am told that out in California there is an organization known as "The Borrowed Time Club." To be a member of this club one must have passed beyond the age of threescore and ten. These added years become more significant when we think of them as an extra gift. But in a real sense all life is "Borrowed Time," and

if we can make a congregation feel that fact they cannot but leave with a greater sense of responsibility for a worthy use of their present years.

Several years ago I conducted the funeral of a man who was seventy-five years of age at the time of his death. In searching for an appropriate text, my glance fell upon this text from Genesis, "And Abram was seventy and five years old when he departed out of Haran." Here was a man who, at the time when most men of his age would be sitting by the fire in an easy chair, left his home and kindred like our own Pilgrim forefathers, and set out for an unknown land.

It was easy to see the application of this verse to the life of the deceased. He, like Abram, at the age of seventy-five, was setting out on a great adventure of faith into an unknown land.

2. *A Personal Anniversary.* Sometimes the day of death or the day of the funeral will fall upon the anniversary of some personal event of significance. Suppose, for instance, that a man died on the anniversary of his birthday. This fact, which might otherwise add to the grief of the family, may be used to emphasize a great truth of our faith, and at the same time bring great comfort to the bereaved. In speaking upon "The Second Birth" the coincidence that the anniversary of his birth falls upon the day of death furnishes the thought that death is really just another birthday—a birth into a new life. These words of Dwight L. Moody would furnish a telling illustration:

"Some day you will read in the papers that D. L. Moody, of East Northfield, is dead. Don't you believe a word of it! At that moment I shall be more alive than I am now. I shall have gone up higher, that is all; out of this old clay tenement into a house that is immortal—a body that death cannot touch; that sin cannot taint; a body fashioned like unto His own glorious body."

A man might die on his wedding anniversary. Suppose that he had lived in happy union with his wife for many years. They had raised a large family of children who were now grown up and out in the world. A few years before the wife had died. The husband remained on in loneliness. Now death comes to unite him once more to the wife of his youth. As in early years they two became one, so now in life's sunset they are again united. Such a thought would be a beautiful memory.

Other significant anniversaries will suggest themselves. They are only occasional coincidences like this—but when they do come they are great in opportunity.

3. *A Holiday.* Sometimes (for Death is no respecter of persons) a funeral will occur on a holiday. The special significance of such a holiday will often be capable of application in the funeral message.

NEW YEAR would suggest the thought that through death we have the opportunity of making a new beginning under more ideal conditions. The

promise in Revelation would come with new appropriateness, "Behold, I make all things new."

PALM SUNDAY, with its note of victory, would suggest this emphasis as we express anew our faith in the victory of Christ over sin and the grave. "After these things I saw, and behold, a great multitude, which no man could number, out of every nation and of all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, arrayed in white robes, and palms in their hands." Palm Sunday must be even more beautiful in Heaven than it is on Earth.

GOOD FRIDAY, with its vivid picture of a Cross against the sky, would remind us that in our hour of sorrow we can look to One who has suffered before us. We remember how that, outside the tomb of Lazarus, "Jesus wept" and we know that this same sympathy is with us in our hour of loss.

EASTER, with its story of the resurrection of Christ, quickens our hope of the resurrection of our loved ones. "Now hath Christ been raised from the dead, the first fruits of them that are asleep."

MEMORIAL DAY would call to mind the duty of remembering our dead and the great debt which we owe to them for their contribution to our life and happiness.

INDEPENDENCE DAY (July 4) would remind us that on this day, in which we declared our independence from another nation, we are forced to declare our dependence upon God. "I can of my own self do

nothing." "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."

LABOR DAY suggests that "Rest from Labor" which comes to us at life's close. "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors; and their works do follow them."

"Now the laborer's task is o'er;
Now the battle day is past;
Now upon the farther shore
Lands the voyager at last.
Father, in Thy gracious keeping
Leave we now thy servant sleeping."

THANKSGIVING would suggest that we should express our gratitude to God for all the years of happy fellowship which we have had with those whom we tenderly lay away. In our sorrow for our loss we must not forget to be thankful for the gift of the friendship which has been ours through the years. "The Lord gave, the Lord hath taken away: blessed be the name of the Lord."

"In counting all the precious boons
For which the grateful feast is spread,
O let us no forget that chief
Among our treasures are our dead.
Let us give thanks that they have lived
And on our lives such radiance poured,
That with the sunshine of the past
Our later, lonelier years are stored." ¹

¹ Frances L. Mace.

On ARMISTICE DAY, when we remember the peace brought to a war-weary world, how appropriate are these words of comfort which Christ gave his disciples when he was about to depart this life: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you."

And so on we might continue indefinitely. Many other holidays will suggest their special message, but enough has been said to point the way. Remember that these are occasional sermons, only appropriate in unusual situations. But one successful message alone may be worth all our care in planning for them.

4. *Weather Conditions.* The weather is one of the most powerful influences over our lives. It is a major topic of conversation. As it changes our moods change. As I write these words it is raining steadily outside. The somber skies cast their spell of gloom upon the landscape. But through a rift in the clouds the sun begins to shine, and lo, a rainbow appears in all its brilliant coloring.

Many funerals are conducted on rainy days. Many ministers have doubtless preached funeral sermons on this text from Genesis, "I do set my bow in the cloud." But when this message is given on a rainy day, its effect is heightened. As the dark clouds about us, so is the gloom which surrounds us on the death of our loved ones. But the rainbow, with its radiant colors of faith, hope, and love, shines in our sky and we are strengthened.

Other weather conditions may suggest new methods of approach to the alert minister.

5. *Family Circumstances.* Often we are called to minister in a home where death has come for the first time. How tenderly we must approach these bereaved ones as they drink for the first time the bitter cup. We recall the story of the burial of Jesus. "Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulcher." That garden represents the happy fellowship of life. In the midst of these is the tomb. "A New Tomb" in the garden!

Again the deceased may be the last of his family. Like the old man described in the poem "The Last Leaf" he has remained behind.

We are more than individuals. We are parts of families. If in the going of the deceased there is anything significant regarding the relationship to the family, it may often be used to advantage.

B. DEALING WITH DIFFICULT SITUATIONS

In a real sense, every funeral is a difficult situation. At every step the minister is confronted with problems which need to be handled tactfully. But some situations are unusually difficult, and a consideration of these possible situations will save much embarrassment.

Among the difficult circumstances with which a minister may have to deal we mention the following: Suicide, Murder, Accident, Non-Churchmember, a Fallen Woman.

1. *Suicide.* One of the most tragic situations into which a minister may be called is that of a suicide,

where a man has deliberately put an end to his own life. To the sorrow of the bereaved family at the loss of their loved one is added the further burden of the manner of his passing. It is indeed a hardhearted minister who can fail to approach such a situation without the most heartfelt sympathy. In everything he says and does he will want to exhibit a Christlike sympathy and tenderness.

There are two ways in which he may approach this occasion. First, he may, if he is not acquainted with the situation, ignore any specific reference to the manner of his death, and preach a message of comfort for the bereaved. He will base his confidence on the goodness of God and his understanding of man's frailty, using some such verse as this: "He knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust."

Second, he may face frankly the manner of his passing. The Bible records the stories of several men who committed suicide.

JUDAS (Matt. 27: 3-5). By his betrayal of the Master, Judas has brought on himself the condemnation of the ages. Yet there is much to be said in his defense. He recognized his sin, and at a late hour endeavored to make atonement by returning the thirty pieces of silver, the profit of the betrayal. Then, as a final desperate atonement, he ended his own life. We cannot approve of the methods he took, but we can appreciate the spirit of remorse which prompted it. Before we condemn Judas too severely, let us ask ourselves how many of us are "Worse than Judas" by our failure to admit our guilt, by our un-

willingness to return the profits of our sinful transactions (a real test of conversion! Cf. Zacchaeus), by our willingness to give our life as the price of our regret.

SAUL (1 Sam. 31 : 3, 4). Here is the most sympathetic portrayal of the tragedy of suicide to be found anywhere in the Bible. A man of high position—the King—is hard pressed on every side. The battle goes sore against him. Defeat and death seem certain. In this mood of despair he falls upon his own sword. How many suicides are explained by these words: “The battle went sore against him.” A terrifying financial problem, an overwhelming sorrow at the loss of loved ones, an incurable physical malady—how human it is that we should be overwhelmed. We can easily understand this tragedy, and yet at the same time wish that there had been sufficient strength to bear it a while longer.

SAUL’S ARMOR-BEARER (1 Sam. 31 : 5). This illustrates the power of example. How often a wave of suicide sweeps over the country. The example of others exerts its subtle influence on us. As we peer into the dark chasm into which others have leaped, we are pulled over into it by an almost irresistible power.

The leader which this young man served was dead. Life had lost its hope for him. With that mistaken sense of honor, still practiced in Oriental countries, he felt bound to go the way of his friend and master.

THE PHILIPPIAN JAILER (Acts 16 : 28). The Philippian jailer was on the point of committing sui-

cide. Awakening from sleep, he saw the open doors of the prison. Supposing the prisoners had fled, he was about to fall upon his own sword, rather than suffer a grievous death for allowing his captives to escape. Except for that voice of assurance coming out of the dark, there would have been another suicide to record. That voice said, "Do thyself no harm, for we are all here." Things were not really so bad as he supposed. In his moment of despair he had overestimated his difficulties. How often we do that today! There would be many "An Averted Tragedy" if more of us would speak the word of assurance to those in distress.

2. *Murder.* The funeral of a murdered man is invariably a tense situation. The minister is there as a representative of God, and should not allow himself to be engulfed by the passion and hatred of those about him. He should remember his responsibility for giving those concerned a saner view of the situation.

The glory of Christianity has been the way in which believers have met persecution and death. The words of Jesus as he hung upon the cross, saying, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do," have been echoed in Stephen's "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge," and by multitudes of unknown martyrs.

The attitude of forgiveness is not only a Christian duty—it is the only way by which the discords and confusions of this world may be resolved into peace. Our ability to overcome the passions of an hour like

this will prove a greater victory than vengeance could ever be.

Let me say right here, before I make a number of suggestions for possible messages in a tragedy of this kind, that there is no place where we should be more careful in choosing our theme than in a case of murder. In the majority of cases I would suggest little or no reference to the murder. But for those exceptional situations where direct reference would be deemed advisable, here are some of the things which might be said.

We might take this opportunity to speak on "Preventing the Causes of Murder." There is nothing we can say or do today to bring back this life. That is the tragedy of such occasions as this. Nothing will now restore to us the life which has been taken. Our tears will not do it. They can only make us sense our loss more keenly. Punishment of the slayer will not do it. No years of imprisonment can restore the lost years of this man's life. Even the deep contrition of the aggressor will not change the facts. Any words of appreciation which we may say today in honor of the deceased will not restore that life.

But there is much that can be done for those who remain. We can dedicate ourselves to the prevention of such tragedies. The causes of murder are deep-seated. Alcohol causes it. Race prejudice causes it. Marriage infidelity causes it. Greed causes it. Therefore, whenever we are able to lessen these and other evils, we are helping to prevent future tragedies.

In the Sermon on the Mount we have what might be called "A Preface to Murder." We are warned not merely against the outward act of killing, but against those irritations and jealousies which precede it. Such things, when allowed to continue, often end in visible crime.

"The First Murder" recorded in the Bible—Cain's murder of Abel—has in it the elements to which we have referred. It was prompted by jealousy. How hard it is for us to see some one, whom we regard as no more capable or deserving than ourselves, have their gift accepted by the world, while it passes ours by unnoticed.

One of the greatest of the Psalms is the fifty-first. It is in reality "A Murderer's Prayer." (Cf. 2 Sam. 11.) David, the King, had been responsible for the death of the valiant Uriah, husband of Bathsheba. Desiring her for a wife, he gave instructions to Joab, the leader of the army, to put Uriah in the forefront of the battle where he would be sure to be killed. The memory of this deed haunted him for the rest of his life. That even a man who had sinned so grievously still had something good in him is shown by this psalm. Its poignant beauty and sorrow have been the means for expressing the repentance of many a modern sinner.

3. *Accident.* Each accident only serves to remind us of "The Uncertainty of Life." The wisdom of the proverb comes home to us: "Boast not thyself of tomorrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth." The traveler who sets out expectantly may

never reach the end of his journey. The husband who kisses his wife at the door and goes to work may never return alive. The young may die before the old; the strong before the weak. In view of this uncertainty it is best for us to be "Ready" (2 Sam. 15: 15) to meet our Lord. We know not how soon we shall have to stand before the Judge of all the earth, therefore "Prepare to meet thy God." (Amos 4: 12.)

Life's uncertainty should also remind us of the folly of postponing the doing of a kindly deed. If we have flowers for our friends, let us give them while they can still enjoy their fragrance. What an eloquent message is expressed by R. C. Meyers in the poem, "If I Should Die Tonight."

"If I should die tonight,
My friends would call to mind, with loving thought,
Some kindly deed the icy hand has wrought,
Some gentle word the frozen lips had said;
Errands on which the willing feet had sped—
The memory of my selfishness and pride,
My hasty words, would all be put aside,
And so I should be mourned tonight.

O, friends. I pray tonight,
Keep not your kisses for my dead, cold brow.
The way is lonely; let me feel them now.
Think gently of me; I am travel worn;
My faltering feet are pierced with many a thorn.
Forgive! O hearts estranged, forgive, I plead!
When dreamless rest is mine, I shall not need
The tenderness for which I long tonight."

Accidents often suggest inspiring themes. Take accidents so widely separated as an Alpine climber falling into the yawning chasm of some deep cliff, and a little boy falling out of an apple tree. Of both, it might be truly said, "He died climbing." How suggestive of that upward urge which has lured men of every generation into danger. Man's progress has been at the price of many lives.

How appropriate in concluding such a service would be the familiar words of Longfellow in his poem "Excelsior" (meaning "higher"), which begins:

"The shades of night were falling fast,
As through an Alpine village passed
A youth, who bore, 'mid snow and ice,
A banner with the strange device,
Excelsior!"

After telling the story in detail it describes the finding of the lad's body the next day:

"A traveler, by the faithful hound,
Half buried in the snow was found,
Still grasping in his hand of ice
That banner with the strange device,
Excelsior!"²

Often men die in saving the lives of others. "Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for a friend." How varied are the ways in which this verse is translated into modern life!

² Used by permission of, and by arrangement with, Houghton Mifflin Company.

A swimmer braves the perilous sea, rescues a helpless person from drowning, but loses his own life in the attempt.

A fireman rescues little children from a burning building, but dies from the effects of the terrible burns received.

A policeman lays down his life in the protection of the community from thieves and robbers.

An automobile driver runs his car into the ditch rather than hit pedestrians on the highway.

These are but a few of the many ways in which the ancient virtue of self-sacrifice is being witnessed in our daily life.

4. *Non-Churchmembers.* To conduct the funeral of a man who is not a Christian is in many respects a very awkward situation. We might compare it to a military funeral for one who was not a soldier, who never put on the uniform of his country. Some will not conduct a funeral for one who is not a Christian, but most ministers take the attitude that they are willing to serve whenever they are invited to do so.

Dean Brown says, "You will be called upon to conduct funeral services for bootleggers and drunkards, for suicides and harlots. When friends of these wretched people send for you, go with a deep sense of gratitude. You are there thanking God that they were not willing to lay their dead away as if they had been burying a dead horse."²

Among the non-members are many very respectable

² *The Making of a Minister*, page 209.

people. In fact, their moral life is sometimes higher than that of most of the members of the churches. Yet, for some reason they never publicly professed their faith in Christ. This is sometimes a very embarrassing situation. Whatever the minister's attitude, he will do well to decide what he believes on this matter. Most ministers will take the position that the keys of heaven and hell do not hang at their girdles, that they are not come for judgment, but to give comfort and strength.

There are obviously a number of Scripture passages which are not appropriate for the non-member, regardless of his high character. The minister will, if he is wise, beware of applying these to the deceased.

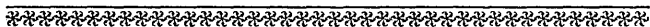
Such a message as "The Safety of the Child," taking as its text the question asked in 2 Kings 4: 25, 26, "Is it well with the child?" furnishes an opportunity for the minister to proclaim with glad assurance our faith in the safety of these little ones whom God commits to our care.

5. *A Fallen Woman.* One of the most trying circumstances in which a minister will be placed is to conduct the funeral of a fallen woman. I have in mind, as an example, the service conducted for an unfortunate girl who died in giving birth to an illegitimate child. In this instance, the mother and baby both died. Both were placed in a single casket, the babe in the arms of its mother. The girl was a

member of the local church, and for many years had sung in the choir.

It is needless to say that at any such funeral, if it be open to the public, there will be an immense crowd, most of whom are there because of a morbid interest in sex scandal. This places a responsibility upon the minister for cleansing the atmosphere, and putting the service upon a deeply spiritual basis.

I would strongly recommend that every time a minister is called upon to conduct a funeral service for some unfortunate woman, he read again the dramatic story of the woman taken in adultery (John 8). Let him re-create the whole story. Let him feel every subtle change of atmosphere. Jesus here rebukes those who in the spirit of condescension are forever "throwing stones" at those who fall into temptation. He makes the accusers conscious of their own sinfulness. He makes the woman realize his deep sympathy for her tragedy. And he sends her away with a new resolve to be clean in heart and soul.



CHAPTER V

THE DOCTRINAL SERMON

WHEN IN DOUBT choose the Doctrinal Sermon. We may look in vain for some significant fact in the life of the deceased upon which to base our message as in the Biographical Sermon. There may be nothing unusual or unique in the circumstances of the funeral as in the Occasional Sermon. But there is always the eternal mystery of death and the innumerable questions which it raises. This is the opportunity of the Doctrinal Sermon—to proclaim our faith in immortality, and to suggest the nature of that life which lies beyond the veil of death.

A. VARIETIES OF THE IMMORTAL HOPE

The funeral service is an opportunity to witness our faith in a life beyond the grave. The presence of the body of the deceased, together with all the preparations for the burial of the physical body, add significance to all that the minister says. He who in the power of a great faith can bring in that dark hour a message of hope and triumph will not lack for attentive ears.

THE MINISTER SHOULD CLOTHE THE IMMORTAL HOPE IN ALL THE VARIETIES OF EXPRESSION WHICH

HE CAN COMMAND. A great truth is worthy of the noblest proclamation. As the master organist does not play in one registration all the time, but pulls out one stop after another, so let the symphony of the immortal hope be expressed in all its glorious variety. From the wistful yearning of the aeolian, the haunting beauty of the flute, to the solid affirmation of the diapason and the deep assurance of the pedal notes, let the minister bring out in all its glory the message which he bears.

1. *A seed planted in the ground.* Our faith in immortality may be likened unto a *seed* which we plant in the ground. As we put the seed into the ground, so do we bury the bodies of our loved ones under the sod. As the body of the seed decays, so does our physical body return unto the dust from which it was made. But as life blossoms new from the dead body of the planted seed, so shall that in us which is deathless continue beyond the grave.

“That which thou sowest is not quickened except it die: and that which thou sowest, thou sowest not the body that shall be, but a bare grain, it may chance of wheat, or of some other grain: but God giveth it a body as it hath pleased him. . . . So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: it is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power: it is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body.” (1 Cor. 15: 36-44.)

These familiar words of the Apostle Paul find a

new and beautiful expression by one of our modern poets:

“What shall we be like when
We cast this earthly body and attain
To immortality?
What shall we be like then?

.
We drop a seed into the ground
A tiny, shapeless thing, shriveled and dry,
And, in the fullness of time, is seen
A form of peerless beauty, robed and crowned
Beyond the pride of any earthly queen.

.
This from a shriveled seed?
Then may man hope indeed!

For man is but the seed of what he shall be,
When, in the fullness of his perfecting,
He drops the husk and cleaves his upward way,
Through earth’s retardings and the clinging clay,
Into the sunshine of God’s perfect day.”¹

2. *Death is but a sleep.* To the Christian *Death is but a sleep*—not “the sleep that knows no waking,” but the sleep which is the preparation for the life which is to be. It is in this high confidence that the poet bids us to face death:

“Sustained and soothed
By an unflinching trust, approach thy grave

¹ John Oxenham, “Seeds.” From *Bees in Amber*. Copyright by American Tract Society.

Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams."

Jesus often spoke of death as but a sleep. When he was called to the house of Jairus, and saw the paid mourners making a loud noise with their lamentation, he challenged their weeping with these words: "The maid is not dead, but sleepeth." And when he took the maid by the hand and awakened her out of the sleep of death, he stirred within every breast the slumbering hope that our loved ones do wake from their sleep.

Another memorable time when Jesus compared death to a sleep was at the raising of Lazarus. He thus communicated the news of Lazarus' death to his disciples, "Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep." Then said his disciples, "Lord, if he sleep, he shall do well. Howbeit Jesus spake of his death: but they thought that he had spoken of taking rest in sleep."

Paul takes this same view of death in his letter to the Thessalonians: "But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as those which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him."

"Asleep in Jesus! blessed sleep,
From which none ever wakes to weep!
A calm and undisturbed repose,
Unbroken by the last of foes!

Asleep in Jesus! peaceful rest,
Whose waking is supremely blest!
No fear, no woe, shall dim that hour
That manifests the Saviour's power."

3. *The dawning of a new day.* The future life finds its most universal portrayal as *the dawning of a new day*. In words of haunting beauty the poets have expressed the immortal hope. Life here is like the earthly day with its morning, its high noon, and its eventide, fading into night. Of one who is taken by a premature death it may be said, "Her sun is gone down while it is yet day." For those who pass into life's eventide, the words of that ageless hymn, "Abide with Me," are forever significant.

"Abide with me! Fast falls the eventide,
The darkness deepens—Lord, with me abide!

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;
Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away.

Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes;
Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies;
Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows
flee;
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me!"

It is this confidence of the new day which sheds a light of glory through the gathering gloom of failing strength and misfortune. "At even time it shall be light." Death is but the dividing line which marks

the entrance into that day that shall endless be.
"There shall be no night there."

It is helpful to call to mind the significance of the order of the Divine Day. While with us it is morning and evening, with God it is "Evening and the Morning." This truth is illustrated in that recurring refrain from the first chapter of Genesis, that matchless poem of Creation:

And it was evening and it was morning, the *first* day.
And it was evening and it was morning, the *second* day.

And it was evening and it was morning, the *third* day.
And it was evening and it was morning, the *fourth* day.

And it was evening and it was morning, the *fifth* day.
And it was evening and it was morning, the *sixth* day.

If in the face of death we can realize that as surely as every sunset is followed by the sunrise, so surely shall the shadow of death give way to the dawning light of the eternal life, then the fear of death is gone.

4. *A river to cross.* From earliest ages Death has been represented as *a river over which we must cross* before we can enter into the life beyond. For the ancients the river Styx was the border of the underworld. For Israel, the Jordan River was the barrier which separated them from the Promised Land. It became also a symbol of the death through which we must pass to the glories of our eternal home. Readers of Bunyan's immortal allegory, *Pilgrim's Prog-*

ress, will remember that vivid description of how Christian and Hopeful passed through the dark waters of the river of Death and were met by two Shining Ones who escorted them to the gates of the Celestial City.

Dwight L. Moody once told the story of a minister who had lost his child and asked another minister to come and preach for him. He came and told how he lived on one side of a certain river, and felt very little interest in the people on the other side until his daughter was married and went across the river to live. From that time he had a new interest in the other side of the river. He would often go to the window and look over into that town where his loved one resided. So heaven takes on a new meaning to us when one of our loved ones leaves us to take up his abode on the other side.

“Over the river they beckon to me—

Loved ones who’ve crossed to the farther side;

The gleam of their snowy robes I see,

But their voices are drowned in the rushing tide.

And I sit and think, when the sunset’s gold

Is flushing river and hill and shore,

I shall one day stand by the water cold,

And list for the sound of the boatman’s oar;

I shall watch for a gleam of the flapping sail,

I shall hear the boat as it gains the strand,

I shall pass from sight with the boatman pale,

To the better shore of the spirit land.

I shall know the loved who have gone before,
And joyfully sweet will the meeting be,
When over the river, the peaceful river,
The angel of Death shall carry me.”²

5. *A ship leaving port.* Akin to the idea of crossing the river is that of *a ship launching out to sea*. The sight of a great ocean liner leaving dock from some great port is unforgettable. Men rush to and fro in last-minute preparations for the long journey ahead, officers give brisk commands to their men, upon the deck the travelers stand to gain a last look at their waiting loved ones on the shore. Then the gong sounds, the gangplank is taken in, the whistle blows, and slowly the great liner launches out into the deep. Upon the deck each hand is waving a handkerchief whose mute farewell is answered from the shore by other handkerchiefs in the hands of the loved ones who remain behind. No one can view such a scene vibrant with the mingled pain of parting and the thrill of a new adventure without a tug at his heartstrings.

Such was the feeling with which Paul left the elders of Ephesus who had come to Miletus to bid him farewell. After a touching scene there on the seashore, where he counseled with them, prayed with them, and wept with them, we are told, “And they accompanied him unto the ship.” And so do we today accompany our loved ones to that ship which takes them to the farther shores.

² Nancy Woodbury Priest.

Shortly before his death, the Rev. Robert J. Burdette wrote a personal letter in which he said: "I watch the sunset as I look out over the rim of the blue Pacific, and there is no mystery beyond the horizon line, because I know what there is over there. I have been there. Over there where the sun is just sinking is Japan. That star is rising over China. In that direction lie the Philippines. I know all that. Well, there is another land that I look toward as I watch the sunset. I have never seen it. I have never seen any one who has been there, but it has a more abiding reality than any of these lands which I do know. This land beyond the sunset—this land of immortality—this heaven of ours is the one thing in the world which I know with absolute, unshaken, unchangeable certainty."

In this high confidence may we say with the poet:

"Sunset and evening star,
And one clear call for me!
And may there be no moaning of the bar,
When I put out to sea."

6. *A moving day.* For those who believe in the future life, *the day of death is but a moving day.* Even as we transfer the decaying body of this earthly tabernacle to its last resting place, a more important transition is taking place. The immortal soul is changing its habitation to the house not made with hands.

“A human soul went forth into the night,
Shutting behind it death’s mysterious door,
And shaking off, with strange resistless might,
The dust that once it wore.”

There are few people who have not had experience in moving from one home to another. Moving day is not without its regrets. No matter how modest our house may be, the memories which cluster about it entwine themselves in our hearts. We cannot leave those rooms in which have occurred so many events of sorrow and joy without feeling a sense of regret.

But our regret in leaving the old home is tempered by two facts. First, our knowledge of its limitations. Year by year it grows more dilapidated, in spite of all that we can do. Second, our thoughts of that finer and more substantial home into which we are moving. We are reconciled to the loss of the old house by our anticipation of the beauty of the new.

So it is with the great transition. Our regret at leaving the old is tempered by our knowledge of the frailty of this physical body of ours, and our anticipation of the spiritual body in which we shall dwell.

“For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”

The abiding place changes, but the life continues. All that is essential will be taken into that Celestial City. The promise of Jesus remains sure, “In my

Father's house are many mansions." Our tears shall vanish when we behold the beauty of that house not made with hands.

7. *A family reunion.* One of the most treasured thoughts of the future life is expressed in the picture of a *Family Reunion*. In a letter written by Abraham Lincoln, he says: "I sincerely hope that my father may yet recover his health; but at all events, tell him to remember to call upon and confide in our great and good merciful Maker, who will not turn away from him in any extremity. . . . Say to him that if we could meet now it is doubtful whether it would not be more painful than pleasant; but that if it be his lot to go now, he will soon have a joyous meeting with the many loved ones gone before, and where the rest of us, through the help of God, hope ere long to join them."

It is that hope of meeting loved ones gone on before which makes heaven mean more to us as the years go by. We who have known in this life the joys of a family reunion at some holiday season, when the children come home from the distant points to which they have moved, have a faint foretaste of the joy of that heavenly reunion. And as year by year more of our family and friends leave us, we feel as did Mr. Moody when, hearing of the death of Henry Drummond, he said, "The home-going of Drummond has added another attraction to heaven."

Now we weep, but then we shall rejoice. Here we feel the pain of parting; there we shall know the joy

of meeting again. How eagerly we look forward to that day pictured in the familiar hymn:

“O then what raptured greetings
On Canaan’s happy shore,
What knitting severed friendships up,
Where partings are no more!
Then eyes with joy shall sparkle,
That brimmed with tears of late,
Orphans no longer fatherless,
Nor widows desolate.”

8. *A victory.* The immortal hope is oft expressed as *a victory*, in which those who have won out in their fight with death and sin are welcomed home. We may then cry in the words of Paul, “O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? . . . Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In case of the death of one who has bravely fought and triumphantly won, the funeral services which we are called to conduct seem more as occasions of triumph than of defeat. I well remember such a service from my boyhood days, when father preached the funeral sermon for a saintly elder in his church upon the text, “I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.” The note of triumph was

dominant in that service because his life had been lived on a high plane. Every minister has had such services, and he comes away with a new sense of the worth-whileness and glory of our common life.

In his renowned sermon, "On Excessive Grief at the Death of Friends," Chrysostom, the greatest preacher of his time, thus describes the death of a Christian: "For as when men are called to some high office, multitudes with praises on their lips assemble to escort them at their departure to their stations, so do all with abundant praise join to send forward, as to greater honor, those of the pious who have departed."

In this high purpose let us welcome the victorious saints.

"Ten thousand times ten thousand,
In sparkling raiment bright,
The armies of the ransomed saints
Throng up the steeps of light:
'Tis finished, all is finished,
Their fight with death and sin;
Fling open wide the golden gates,
And let the victors in!"

We have mentioned a few of the varied forms in which the hopes of immortality may be expressed—a seed planted in the ground, soon to blossom forth into newness of life; a sleep from which we shall wake to be with Christ; the dawning of a new day after the night of death; a river over which we must cross to enter into the life beyond; a ship launching out

on a journey to distant shores; a moving day in which we transfer our souls from this earthly tabernacle to the house not made with hands; a family reunion where partings are no more; a day of victory in which we shall receive the prize and the acclaim of the multitudes. These and many more are the themes upon which we may set forth the immortal hope.

B. REASONS FOR OUR FAITH

But the minister will not only clothe the immortal hope in the garments of beauty and variety. *He must give substance to that faith by giving reason for the hope that is within him.* His words may be beautiful, but they can never be with power until they are backed by a reasonable faith. Let the minister therefore explore carefully the words of other men regarding the future life to see what discoveries of theirs may add substance to his belief in immortality.

1. Our faith in immortality is strengthened by our knowledge of *the greatness of God*. In the hour when death has shattered our hopes it is good to know that our God is a great God—the heavens declare his glory and the firmament showeth his handiwork. The voices of nature are eloquent of his power.

The power of God assures us that he is able to give the gift of immortal life. As the Creator of the world and all that in it is, he is greater than anything which he has made. He who out of dust fashioned our bodies and breathed into us the breath of

life is surely able to continue that life beyond the seeming defeat that men call death. Men may doubt the existence of the future life, but all must admit the existence of this present life. And who is there who can explain the mystery of life? Yet we know it is a fact. So although we cannot explain the mystery of death, we believe that beyond it there is life eternal. The mystery of death is eclipsed by the mystery of life.

This greatness of God assures us of a permanent reality in the midst of life's continual change. "Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God. A thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night."

"The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God abideth forever."

"I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth."

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed."

These are but a few of the great affirmations of faith from the Bible which spring from our knowledge of the greatness of God. Our God is able to bring us safely across the River of Death if he so desires, and the knowledge of his strength and power increases our faith.

In every moment of our weakness, there is a God who stands by, like a rescue ship in the darkness of a storm at sea, ready and able to save. Our God is a great God. He is able!

2. But God's greatness is not enough of itself to assure us of immortality. God must not only be great enough, but he must be good enough. To the greatness of God must be added *the goodness of God*. He must not merely have the power to give us immortal life; he must also be willing and anxious to use that power for our good. Power in the hands of an evil spirit may mean our destruction; only in the hands of a good God are we safe.

The Christian finds about him innumerable evidences of a good God. This world, with its inexhaustible treasures of mineral wealth, its rich plains and fertile valleys, its beautiful flowers and majestic mountains, is a dwelling place fit for the gods. It was intended for a Paradise—and only by our sin do we make it otherwise.

The record of history confirms our faith. In every age, no matter how wicked, he has not been left without witness. He has raised up prophets who have voiced God's message. In countless ways he has sought to win a lost and sinful world unto himself until finally, "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son."

In the gift of Jesus Christ to the world we find the crowning witness of a God who cares. No matter how long we may be away in the far country, yet his eye is ever upon that road that leads home, to catch

the first sight of the prodigal returning. "God is love." Nothing so sets him apart from us as this crowning virtue of his character.

In times of sorrow and bereavement we may confidently say, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." Or we may say, "He is my refuge and my fortress; my God: in him will I trust."

Our faith, not only in God's power, but in his goodness, will prompt us to say with new confidence, "Let not your heart be troubled: *ye believe in God!*"

3. A further cause for our faith in immortality is our appreciation of the *worth of man*. The crowning event of creation was the making of man. The sun, the moon, the stars of heaven are but the jewels in his canopy. The fish of the sea and the animals of the land and air are his servants. The herbs of the field and the fruit of the ground are his food. The creation of the five succeeding days was but the preparation for the climax of man's creation. These lesser creations were but the sign posts pointing toward a greater wonder. It is the presence of humanity on this earth which gives meaning and purpose to all else.

No wonder that the Psalmist in his amazement exclaims, "What is man, that thou art mindful of him? And the son of man that thou visitest him? For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honor."

It is this Divine recognition of the supreme worth of humanity that adds to our faith in immortal life. We stand before a picture, being painted by a noted

artist. We cannot believe that such infinite care is being lavished upon that canvas in order that it might be torn to shreds as soon as it is painted.

We see workmen building a great cathedral. We will not believe that they are building such a work of beauty only that at its completion it may be torn down.

Neither do we believe the false prophecies of the materialists when they claim that these characters of ours, fashioned at such infinite cost, are to be consigned to oblivion. God has placed within these mortal bodies of ours something that is not mortal—a spirit that will not die.

It is this consciousness of man's intrinsic worth—the value of a human soul—which urges us to Build for Eternity.

“This is the ship of pearl, which, poets feign,
Sails the unshadowed main,
The venturous bark that flings
On the sweet summer wind its purpled wings
In gulfs enchanted, where the Siren sings,
And coral reefs lie bare,
Where the cold sea maids rise to sun their streaming
hair.

Its webs of living gauze no more unfurl;
Wrecked is the ship of pearl!
And every chambered cell,
Where its dim dreaming life was wont to dwell,
As the frail tenant shaped his growing shell,
Before thee lies revealed,
Its irised ceiling rent, its sunless crypt unsealed!

Year after year beheld the silent toil
That spread his lustrous coil;
Still, as the spiral grew,
He left the past year's dwelling for the new,
Stole with soft step its shining archway through,
Built up its idle door,
Stretched in his last-found home, and knew the old
no more.

Thanks for the heavenly message brought by thee,
Child of the wandering sea,
Cast from her lap, forlorn!
From thy dead lips a clearer note is born
Than ever Triton blew from wreathèd horn!
While on mine ear it rings,
Through the deep caves of thought I hear a voice
that sings:

Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,
As the swift seasons roll!
Leave thy low-vaulted past!
Let each new temple, nobler than the last,
Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,
Till thou at length art free,
Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresting
sea!"³

4. For most people the crowning assurance of immortality is *the testimony of Jesus Christ*. He speaks as one having authority, and not as the scribes. By his miracles he has witnessed the power

³ Oliver Wendell Holmes. Used by permission of, and by arrangement with, Houghton Mifflin Company.

of God, by his sacrificial service he revealed the love of God, and by his own character he showed men their potential worth as sons of God. Thus in his own person and teaching are evidenced the reasons for our faith in immortality.

His word of authority is the voice of experience. He became obedient unto the death of the cross. He was buried in the tomb and he rose the third day to be alive forevermore.

It is he who came "that we might have life, and have it more abundantly." It was he who said to his disciples on the eve of his departure from them, "I go to prepare a place for you." It was he who said, "Because I live, ye shall live also." It was he who proclaimed these immortal words now inscribed over the tomb of an illustrious American, Woodrow Wilson, "I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die."

These testimonies of Christ about the future life are a tower of strength to the bereaved. He has tasted death for every man and won the victory. His word is with power. Let us, remembering *who* he was (the Son of God) and *what* he did (overcoming sin and death), not hesitate to call upon him as witnesses to our faith in the endless life.

C. THE NATURE OF THE FUTURE LIFE

It is safe to say that there is no subject in which there is such persistent and widespread interest as

the nature of the future life. We are not content to be assured *that* there is a life hereafter; we yearn to know something of what that life is like. He who can say something worthwhile on this subject is always assured of a hearing. At the time of the funeral service it is certain that questions regarding the nature of the future life are haunting the minds of many of those present. Although the minister must needs recognize the limitations of our knowledge of the details of what lies beyond, yet there is much that can and should be said.

An unusual and helpful way to think about heaven is suggested in the subject, "Things We Shall Miss in Heaven." In our examination of that beautiful symbolic picture of heaven furnished us in the closing chapters of Revelation, we are attracted no less by the things that shall not be in heaven, than by the things that shall be there. Heaven will be heaven largely because of the absence of those things which hamper and blight our life on earth. Notice the enemies of our peace which shall be absent from the Celestial City: "There shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain; for the former things are passed away." There shall be no closed doors, for "the gates of it shall not be shut at all." "There shall be no night there." Heaven will be attractive because of the things which will not be there.

Heaven stands in the language of religion for the realization of the ideal. It is natural therefore that our picture of what it is like has varied through the

ages. Thus the Egyptian looked forward to a heaven of farming under ideal conditions, where the Nile never failed to overflow and harvests were always bountiful; the ancient Teuton, the Valhalla, with its endless round of eating, drinking, and fighting; and the North American Indian, to the Happy Hunting Ground. For the Buddhist the ideal is Nirvana, or rest through the extinction of desire; while for the Mohammedan heaven is the gratification of all desires, no matter how sensual those desires might be. In contrast with these we have the Christian ideal of heaven with the satisfaction of every right desire and the extinction of every immoral desire.

But even in Christianity, heaven has not always been pictured in a way which would be attractive to modern minds. For the medieval age, heaven was a sort of ideal monastery, with nothing but distinctly religious interests and activities; while for the Puritans it was a sort of ideal meetinghouse or "protracted meeting" where congregations ne'er break up and Sabbaths never end.

Many of the statements which we find in the New Testament are obviously figurative, but in it all we can distinguish the main feature of heaven according to the Christian teaching. The three main elements in heaven are: 1. Christian Fellowship. 2. Christian Character. 3. Christian Activity. Let us consider these more in detail.

The ideal of Christian fellowship is repeatedly expressed in the New Testament in such phrases as "with Christ." Heaven means the presence of Christ

and the Christlike. It means, not only that we shall know the prophets and the apostles, but that we shall know our loved ones who are now a part of that great "cloud of witnesses" who have gone on.

The second ideal of Christian character is expressed in the phrase "like Christ." Heaven is the realization in our own life of those qualities of life which were manifest in the life of Jesus. It is not merely a change of abode, it is a change in our own selves—a death to sin and a resurrection to righteousness.

The third ideal is Christian activity. In heaven we shall not sit around idly with harps in our hands—especially those of us who do not know how to play them! Neither shall we be burdened with the long hours of servitude as so many have in this life. Idleness and slavery are alike incompatible with the Christian ideal.

It is easy to see how men burdened with toil and having no opportunity for relaxation and enjoyment of the cultural things of life should think of heaven as a place where they should never have to do a single thing. But these past years of unemployment have demonstrated to this generation that inactivity is not only monotonous, but destructive to the body and soul of man. What we need is not idleness, but work under proper conditions upon that which really interests us—the artist with his brush, the mason with his trowel, the teacher with his book, and the mechanic with his tools, all working upon that which is worthwhile.

Have you never been haunted with the thought of what a heaven this old earth would be if every individual were engaged in Christian activity? If our labor were all constructive and none of it destructive? Think of what visions of beauty our homes could be, our public buildings, our highways, what masterpieces of art, what abundance of food and clothing there would be for all if we but worked as Christians.

Any one of these three phases of the ideal life is pregnant with thought for funeral messages. Go through the pages of the New Testament with these ideals of heaven in mind, and there will be suggested a multitude of texts for the illumination of the heavenly ideal.

CHAPTER VI

THE FUNERAL SERVICE

THIS BOOK DEALS primarily with the funeral *message*. It is an attempt to develop a homiletical method for the funeral sermon. It does not seek to deal with other parts of the service, except in passing. That has been dealt with by others.

But since the effectiveness of the funeral message depends to a considerable degree upon its setting, a few practical words here about the service itself may not be out of place.

1. ORDER OF SERVICE

For those groups who follow a prescribed ritual in the conduct of funerals, the order of service is not an especial problem. All these ministers need to do is to master thoroughly the order of service, and give it with reverence and understanding.

But for that large group of ministers whose churches do not have a prescribed ritual for funerals, the order of service is an important point. For young men, just starting out in the ministry, it is often a problem. I have found that most ministers gradually develop their own order of service, and use that whenever possible.

I say "whenever possible," for one never knows what strange variations in the service the family will request. One must be prepared for this. He will be asked to make all sorts of queer changes, announcements, etc., just to satisfy some bit of family sentiment. Many people try to pattern their funeral after some particular funeral in the past which has appealed to them. If the husband or wife has passed away a few years before, the family will often try to duplicate that service in planning services for the remaining partner. In all of these requests—reasonable and unreasonable—we will have to use our tact and common sense. Where, without spoiling the service, we can grant their requests, it is wise to do so. Where it is not possible, one can often by a sympathetic attitude win them over to your own point of view. But a fundamental point of view with me is that the primary purpose of the funeral service is not simply to please the minister, but to be most helpful and comforting to the family.

Where there is no special reason for doing otherwise, the following is the simple order of service which I ordinarily use:

Prelude

Hymn by the quartet

Scripture Reading

Prayer

Hymn by the quartet

Obituary (where an obituary is customary)

Message (generally closing with a short prayer)

Hymn by the quartet

You will note that there is no Benediction here as in any ordinary church service, for the simple reason that the service is not concluded until the body is lowered into the grave.

Now, let us consider in detail the individual features which go to make up the service.

2. MUSIC

Music is an important part of the funeral service. The choice of hymns and the manner in which they are rendered will do much to help or hinder its effectiveness.

There is perhaps no part of the service in which there will be greater variety. Sometimes the family will request no singing at all. Perhaps the words of two hymns will be read without accompaniment. Those who desire singing will specify all the way from one to five hymns. Some will insist on having a soloist; others are anxious for a mixed quartet.

Where a church depends upon volunteer help for music the problem of securing singers for funerals is often a great one. There may be as many as three or four calls in a single week. To find musicians that often who are able and willing to leave their work is sometimes difficult. The mere labor of telephoning to find who is available is often considerable. Occasionally the family will prefer to secure their own singers; but generally the church is expected to provide.

In the cities there is an increasing use of funeral homes—many of which are very beautiful. Some

undertakers have paid singers on their staff who render this service where there is no other provision for it. Others have automatic pipe-organs which operate on the principle of the player-piano, where no singers are available.

Hymns should be chosen with care. The old, familiar hymns are generally best. There are also a number of beautiful modern songs. The audience is more greatly touched by the music than anything else in the service. The familiar strains of an old tune often release the floodgates of emotion. It is best wherever possible to have the hymns of hope instead of those which dwell in the valley of the shadow.

3. THE SCRIPTURE

The Scripture lesson is often read badly. Sometimes men stumble over the Word of God as if they were reading in an unknown tongue, or else mumble it in a careless professional manner as if they did not care. There is no excuse for this. A little time spent in studying the Scripture most often used in funeral services will help much.

It is a good thing for the minister to compile his own list of those passages most often quoted—Twenty-third Psalm, John 14, Psalms 90 and 91, First Corinthians 15, Second Corinthians 4: 16 to 5: 9, Isaiah 40: 27-31, John 11, Revelation 21 and 22, etc. These he can study until he can give them with understanding and expression. If at all possible, let him memorize some of the more familiar passages which are called for time and time again. This will

enable him to understand them better. It will also make them available to him on short notice, or in any order in which the situation may seem to dictate. In my own ministry I have found the greatest satisfaction in having those most familiar chapters memorized. Funeral goers never tire of these great Bible chapters, and if you can give them with expression and understanding you make the Bible mean more to them than ever before.

There are many good funeral manuals which contain appropriate selections of Scripture. They will repay a careful examination.

4. PRAYER

Is there anything more revealing than a man's prayer? Effective public prayer depends not alone on the gift of words. It leans even more heavily upon the quality of the spiritual life. If we would be most helpful in public prayer, we must be more diligent in private prayer.

The bane of public prayer is meaningless repetitions. The cure for this is a more careful study of each individual case, and a more sympathetic entering into the situation. If you will identify yourself with the life of the deceased in the manner described in Chapter II, this will be easier.

It is also of value to saturate one's mind and heart with the great prayers of our ancient liturgies, and with the modern expressions in prose and poetry alike.

5. THE OBITUARY

The reading of an obituary at the funeral service is not so common as it used to be. In the larger cities this custom is fast dying away; yet in the smaller towns and villages it is still customary. For those who serve where obituaries are not used, the following words are not so important. But for that large group who will minister where it is common, these suggestions, which arise out of practical experience, may be helpful.

Who is to write the obituary? This is one of the first questions that will arise. In most families there will be some one who is accustomed to doing it. Often the minister will be asked to do it. My own practice has been to have some relative or friend of the family do this if at all possible. Only as a last resort do I undertake the task. I have found that, due to the lack of my intimate knowledge of the family history, something is generally left out. At the time of death, the family and intimate friends have time at their disposal in which they can piece together a more accurate account of the life of the deceased. There are, however, times when the minister should undertake this. In some families it is embarrassing, owing to lack of education, for them to attempt it.

Whoever writes the obituary, it should be brief and simple. Some of the long, flowery eulogies which one hears occasionally make one wish that obituaries had never been heard of! As in the funeral sermon,

so in the obituary, one should stick close to the facts. Simple, heartfelt appreciation is fine, but exaggerated praise read before those who know intimately the life of the deceased is very embarrassing.

For those who desire a simple model upon which to write obituaries, the following suggestions are given:

First, a chronological statement of the facts of the life of the deceased in the order in which they occurred: Birth, education, marriage, lifework, family, death, etc.

Second, a brief appraisal of the life, mentioning anything of unusual significance. (Here is where there is most danger of overstatement.)

Third, a list of the surviving relatives, beginning with the immediate family.

Fourth, a bit of poetry. (Not too long.)

The above is only one of many ways in which the obituary may be written. Personally I prefer variety in their composition. A good way to decide what you want to do yourself is to read other obituaries, of which there are likely to be many samples in the old family Bible.

There is this much to be said for the obituary. It is often a great help to the minister in preparing his message. He at least can gather the main outlines of the life of the deceased. With this in hand he can lead the friends to a fuller discussion of that life. Often, the obituary will suggest to the minister the line of approach which he desires to use in his message.

Whether you use the obituary or not, it will be of great value for you to have photographed on your own mind the main outlines of the life of the deceased. If the obituary is used in your community, and you feel that you must enter into that custom, it is well that we strive to make it as helpful as possible, and as free from objectionable statements as possible.

6. AT THE GRAVE

Where the deceased is a member of a fraternal or a military organization, that group is given charge at the grave. The minister will always inquire as to the plans in this regard, and will confer with the officer in charge of the group as to the proper manner in which they may co-operate at the grave. Usually, in such instances, the only part which the minister has is to pronounce the benediction.

Where the minister has charge, he may vary his order of service to suit the occasion. If the weather conditions are unfavorable—a driving rain, a severe blizzard—it will be well to make the service as brief as possible. Also, conditions will arise where members of the family are on the point of prostration. In such cases it is unwise to prolong the difficult hour of parting at the grave.

Where time permits there may be a few verses of Scripture, a prayer, the committal, and a concluding benediction. Additions or subtractions may be made as the occasion warrants. Sometimes in place of the Scripture and prayer a poem may be substituted. Sometimes, just before the benediction, when it is a

warm, sunshiny day, I love to repeat these tender words:

“Warm summer sun,
Shine kindly here.
Warm southern wind,
Blow softly here.
Green sod above,
Lie light, lie light,
Good night, dear heart,
Good night, good night.”¹

The committal service is generally used. Although I use the customary committal, I am not satisfied with it. I have been looking for something better. Perhaps it has already been written. Perhaps some reader of these pages will do it. I hope so.

¹ Robert Richardson.

CHAPTER VII

TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR FUNERAL MESSAGES

I

THOU SHALT NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS. Tell the truth—not necessarily the whole truth, but nothing but the truth. You do not need to take out the family skeleton and rattle its bones in the presence of the assembled multitude. But neither do you need to bring out the ministerial whitewash. If you do not know anything about the deceased, then do not say anything about him. If you know him to be a great sinner, do not picture him as one of the saints of God. You can do the deceased no good by a flowery eulogy composed of things which aren't so. You can do yourself and the church a lot of harm by bearing false witness. If you depart from the truth in a funeral sermon, the community will rightly suspect that you are likely to do the same at other times.

II

THOU SHALT REMEMBER THAT SYMPATHY WILL COVER A MULTITUDE OF HOMILETICAL SINS. There is no substitute for it. If people feel that you really care for them, and that you feel the burden of their

sorrow, they will overlook a lot of mistakes. But if they suspect that you are simply talking shop, merely expressing words of consolation which you do not feel, then your ministry to their bereavement is doomed to failure. It is possible for us honestly to sympathize with those in sorrow, even when we may feel that it is their own fault. Without sympathy you can do nothing. If of you it can be truthfully said, "This one thing thou lackest," then go plow corn or build fences, but do not attempt to preach funeral sermons.

III

THOU SHALT NOT BE HEARD FOR THY MUCH SPEAKING. The value of your words to the bereaved family is not to be measured by the length of your sermon. After the first fifteen or twenty minutes they will probably hear little that you say. A short, simple message is more fitting than long-winded oratory. Let not the presence of a large congregation so intoxicate you with a sense of your own importance that you forget your terminal facilities. They have come to honor the dead rather than hear the living. Let your words then in becoming modesty be few.

IV

THOU SHALT BEWARE OF DEATHBED STORIES. A funeral service is difficult enough for the bereaved family without the unnecessary punishment of such phrases as "this grim monster of death" and heart-rending repetition of pathetic last moments.

Your function as a minister is to make it easier rather than more difficult for the family to face their loss. It is no matter for boasting that we can bring tears at a funeral. Anybody can do that. Our task is to dry those tears through the contagion of a faith that sees beyond death to life eternal.

V

THOU SHALT FIT THE MESSAGE TO THE OCCASION. The same suit will not fit every man. Neither will the same funeral message. Let there be such individuality about the sermon as there is in made-to-measure clothes. This does not mean that you must make many personal references to the life of the deceased. It means simply that you have put yourself in touch with his life and spirit. You have entered sympathetically into the background of his life—his hopes and fears, his successes and failures, his abiding affections. Then out of this background you have selected some theme, so apt, so appropriate to the man, that those who knew him best will instinctively say, "That was the very word which needed to be said."

VI

THOU SHALT NOT CRY WITH A LOUD VOICE. There are perhaps times and occasions for such speaking, but not at a funeral service. Even those who at other times would be noisy are strangely quiet. As we enter into the presence of death, a great hush steals over our souls. We are quiet and attentive. No

need for trumpet calls—our ears are attuned to the slightest whisper of the still, small voice. Not only man, but God, is listening. No voice, then, so appropriate as that quiet voice of assurance and sympathy. The loud voice will make them wonder who you are calling that is so far away. The quiet voice will suggest the immanence of Him who is

“Closer to us than breathing,
Nearer than hands and feet.”

VII

THOU SHALT NOT PROCLAIM THY DOUBTS. There are enough doubts in the world already. Those who are present at the funeral service have their full share without your adding to them. What they crave desperately is a saving faith. What is there in your religious belief to meet the desolate hour of death? If you have some strong, clear word of assurance that will bring out the rainbow of hope in the midst of the clouds of doubts, you may be sure of an attentive audience. What they desire is not questions raised, but questions answered. It matters little what you don't believe in; it matters much what you *do* believe in.

VIII

THOU SHALT NOT DENOUNCE. The impulse to do so will often be well-nigh irresistible. Some rascal who has wasted his substance in riotous living will seem a likely object lesson to the community. The

events of his life will point a moral and adorn a tale. But it is a serious question whether such denunciation ever does any good at such a time. Denunciation is always a dangerous weapon, to be used with great discrimination. It is difficult to imagine its appropriate use at a funeral. There is something unfair about taking advantage of the friends and relatives at such a time which causes deep-seated resentment. Instead of weaning them from their sins, it only drives them farther from the kingdom. Far better is that wooing note which comes out of a sincere sorrow for the tragedy that has befallen the deceased.

IX

THOU SHALT NOT HARP UPON ONE STRING. There are many beautiful themes in the symphony of faith. One of these themes is likely to attract you more than others. But you must beware of using it all the time. The second coming of Christ is a precious hope, the necessity of Scriptural baptism is a worthy subject, the outlawry of war is a vital problem, but it is not profitable to make a hobby of one of these themes and be forever harping upon it. The funeral service is impoverished if we make it a mere display of our special interest. Let us not be mere dispensers of patent medicine, a cure-all for every ill; but let us rather as a discriminating physician adapt our treatment to the need of the patient.

X

THOU SHALT REMEMBER ALWAYS THY AMBASSADORSHIP. You are Christ's representative. Standing in the presence of death, you speak for the Lord of Life. By your presentation of the gospel your Christ will be judged. It is a humbling thought. What if by our faulty message or insincere attitude we should cause seeking souls to miss the Kingdom? Remembering our responsibility as Christ's representative will point the way to the solution of many problems which will arise. If, remembering his matchless life and teaching, we seek to minister in his spirit, we will be given strength and wisdom for the task. Of our own selves we can do nothing. But we can do all things through him that strengtheneth us—even Jesus Christ our Lord.



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